Five advantages of skill

Skill, a deceptively simple word. The accepted OED definition is taken as 'the ability to do something well', with an etymology lying in the Old Norse word for discernment and knowledge. This older conception understands reason as a faculty of the mind, and speaks to the orthodox view that skill is the application of knowledge. More contemporary understandings quoted by the dictionary, however, speak to skill as a form of practical or embodied knowledge. Rather than foreclose understandings of skill and skilled practice, in this special issue we seek to explore and extend conceptions, characterisations, and applications of skill within and beyond geography.

This spirit of openness and the collection of papers assembled for the special issue arose out of two sessions that we chaired at the 2014 RGS-IBG annual conference in London on 'Geographies of Skilled Practice'. Although geographers are demonstrating increasing interest in the power and significance of craft and making cultures and geographies of learning, we recognised skill and skilled practice have received little explicit attention in the discipline to date – an imbalance our sessions sought to address. The sessions were initially framed by the question: what is the place of skill in 21st century? We prompted our participants to consider whether the frenetic pace of contemporary life and availability of new technologies might augur the death of skill? The papers and responses elicited decisively demonstrated that skilled practice is not something to be resigned to the past. Rather than our present moment confirming Andre Leroi-Gourhan's pessimistic predictions about the 'incorporation of bodily gestures and instruments into mechanical [electronic and digital] processes', the papers emphasised the ways in which skill is dynamically co-produced between different bodies (both human and non), technologies and materials in and across a variety of temporal and spatial scales, contexts and settings.[i]

Furthermore, to avoid perpetuating romantic and static conceptions of skill, the papers - covering skilled practices found in musical performance, animal husbandry, digital design and contemporary art - were chosen to deliberately reflect David Pye's assertion that the crafts have no unique purchase on the matter(s) of skill.[ii] Yet even those papers centring on so-called 'traditional' handicrafts worked against the idea that such skilled craft practices are stable and unchanging through time, what John Ruskin called the 'dulled-wits view' of tradition.[iii] Rather they emphasized craft and skilled practices as dynamic, distributed, relational, and, therefore, precarious achievements. In emphasising

the dynamic and distributed over the static and stationary a more pressing geographical question emerged out of the sessions: where is skill located? This is not just a question of where skilled practice 'takes place', its sites and situations, but also prompts a deeper ontological and epistemological rethinking of skill. It is this rethinking of skill that framed our curation of this collection and is at stake in our editorial. In what follows we map out this rethinking and introduce the five advantages of skill that the papers develop.

Skill is practical

Skill is practical in that it is concerned with the actual doing or use of something with accomplishment. Skilled practice is therefore often associated with the widespread misapprehension that accomplishment leads to a progressive loss of concentration and awareness. In the cognitive sciences skill has been closely linked to habit where it is thought that through repetition practical action becomes habitual action, which is thought of as automatic and unthinking. However just as JD Dewsbury and David Bissell have challenged the 'dead' modes of thought 'that think habit merely as mechanistic and routine automation' this collection challenges the view that skilled practice is somehow unconscious or involuntary.[iv] Rather than thought processes retreating and bodily responses taking over, the skill it takes to, for example hand-knit lace or play the clarinet, emerges through a unitary circuit of body-brain-environment. Joanna Mann and Emily Payne papers demonstrate that we should therefore think of these skilled practices as finely tuned and highly creative forms of thinking-acting-responding.

Skill is processual

Skill is processual in that the skilled practitioner works emergently and responsively rather than rubrically and successionally (i.e. from a set of instructions or from one discrete phase to the next). Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari exemplify the work of gothic journeymen stonecutters to highlight what they term as the critical distinction between procedures of 'reproducing' and 'following'.[v] Rather than working *from*, or 'reproducing', the plans of the architect, the stonecutters were working *with*, or 'following', the 'singularities' of the stone – which is to argue that the singularities that populate the stone contribute just as much to the shape of the cathedral as the tools and the actions of the stonecutters. Following is therefore a matter of engaging 'in a continuous variation of variables, instead of extracting constants from them'.[vi] This is

why for Tim Ingold the skilled practitioner carves a path that can be followed rather than predicted.[vii] And, as Mann's paper exemplifies, even in the case of the novice lace-knitter who is initially forced to depend on instructions, they still have to 'find their way, attentively and responsively, but without further recourse to explicit instruction' once in the midst of practice.[viii] For Mann this demonstrates how the skill of lace knitting is not (and never has been) reducible to the transmission of rules and therefore to a singular form of practice. Rather, by following how this tradition of practice has adapted, developed and mutated over time and place, she emphasises it is precisely because this skill is processual and unpredictable that it can be thought of as 'traditional'.

Skill is technical

Skill is technical in that it involves not just techniques of the body but encompasses what Bernard Stiegler calls the 'originary technicity' of the body.[ix] Rather than figure both bodies and tools as separate things-in-themselves, as Marcel Mauss does in *Body Techniques*,[x] Stiegler builds on the pioneering work of paleoanthropologist Andre Leroi-Gourhan to argue human bodies co-evolve with technology.[xi] For Leroi-Gourhan, although he points out that tool-use is not the sole property of humans, the human transition to bipedalism freed up the hands to enable tool use and making, a process he terms 'externalisation': '[t]he whole of our evolution has been oriented toward placing outside ourselves what in the rest of the animal world is achieved inside by species adaptation'.[xii] What characterises the distinction between human and non-human animals for Leroi-Gourhan is that human tool use constitutes a third kind of 'externalised' memory (in addition to the genetic memory contained in DNA and the individual memory of the nervous system).[xiii]

Stiegler has since termed this as a 'process of exteriorization' and we witness this process at work in Payne's paper where she illustrates how musical instruments can be understood as 'repositories' of different kinds of know-how that emerge and are animated through collaboration.[xiv] However, while Stiegler can be considered a 'technological optimist', Leroi-Gourhan cut a more contradictory path. On the one hand, he was excited by the prospect of what the human could become through the 'exteriorisation' of their memory into technical artefacts, yet on the other, he also worried that something of our 'humanness' would be lost.[xv] For Leroi-Gourhan it was the potential 'regression of the hand', that 'ever-skillful servant of human technical intelligence', to the progress of mechanisation that was of most concern.[xvi] Yet as Julie

Botticello and Tom Fisher's paper demonstrates, the mechanisation of lace production did not lead to the deskilling of the Cluny Lace workforce. They not only show that Cluny Lace workers still retain an ability to 'think with one's fingers', but rather push us to consider that this form of embodied intelligence, what they term as 'skilled know-how', does not reside in one particular place in the factory (i.e. in the head or hands of the workers), but is rather distributed across the bodies, machines, materials, documents and organisational arrangements that make the entire production process possible.[xvii]

Skill is ecological

Skill is ecological in that it is not of the individual body, but of the entire field of relations that make practice possible. For Ingold, this is constituted by 'the presence of the organism-person, indissolubly body and mind, in a richly structured environment', which is why the study of skill '*demands* an ecological approach'.[xviii] According to Ingold's 'ecological perspective', skills are neither innate nor acquired, but are rather 'grown': 'incorporated into the human organism through practice and training in an environment'.[xix] Ingold's focus on practical enskilment, conceived as the embodiment of capacities of awareness and response by environmentally situated agents, has therefore helped us to overcome the overly rigid divisions between mind, body and environment that have plagued prior theorisations of skill.

Many of the papers in the collection draw on an ecological perspective to emphasise the collaborative and situated nature of skill. For example, Rachel Hunt's paper, focusing on the skill of living simply in huts and bothies, offers the concept of skillscape as a supplement to Ingold's earlier notion of 'taskscape' to describe the ways in which these dwellings exist not only as a collection of tasks (taskscape), but also produce certain skilled competencies and situations (skillscapes).[xx] Similarly, Sage Brice's paper presents observational drawing as a relational, situational and durational practice, one that allows her to 'attune' to the vital ecologies of a contested wetland landscape. Crucially both papers emphasize that just as materials and technologies are not passive, neither are the environments in which skill takes place. Skilled practice is therefore about developing capacities to work with *and* against tools, materials and technologies as well as broader environmental factors.

And it is precisely because skill is relational and ecological that it is precarious. Emily Adams' paper emphasises that although the skill of beekeeping is necessarily

collaborative not all collaborators are always 'visible, welcome, willing'.[xxi] The complexities that are involved in learning to manage honey-bees connects to Bissell's call for researchers to pay attention to the more 'volatile' forms of life that can call 'the sustainability of skilled performance(s) into question'.[xxii] Many of the papers in the collection highlight that far from being guaranteed skilled practices are often marked by their relational and ecological fragility and that therefore the process of becoming skilled is 'not assured'.[xxiii] This said, as we see in Payne's paper, breakdowns in performance ecologies can lead to creative breakthroughs and the growth of skill in new directions. Instead of aiming for mastery then, her paper emphasises that the skilled practitioner must be willing to follow an improvisatory, collaborative and, therefore, precarious path.

Skill is political

Skill is political in that there is a continuous flow between the micro- (that which is emergent) and macro- (that which exists more concretely and can be represented) politics of practice. We perhaps see this most clearly in the tensions Adams identifies between beekeeping as a complex and gradual process of enskilment and government and regulatory-body attempts to standardise and formalise training. For example, the move towards the use of exams and qualifications, which bring with them an implication of an end-point to learning, contrasts strongly with Adams' ethnographic research which highlights the need to support the novice beekeepers' continued learning through their active engagements with the micro-politics and ecologies of hives. This underlines that given skill is processual and ecological it can only be assessed immanently and situationally by both the practitioner themselves and the wider communities of practice they are enmeshed within. This said, as skill implies accomplishment, what constitutes accomplishment and how it is decided upon and assessed necessarily becomes macro-political. The issue invariably comes when those communities governing skill become so disconnected from the level of practice that the flow between the micro and macro-politics of practice ceases.

Historically this is what happened with the powerful and patriarchal urban craft guilds. Although craft guilds began as societies for sharing practice they grew into monopolies of skilled labour and employment, to the extent that you were only allowed to practice a trade if you were a member of a guild. And as Marine Pacault and Merle Patchett's empirical focus on Parisian plumassiers (feather-makers) and fleuristes (flower-makers) details, membership of the guilds had a clear gender politics, as female membership was confined to a narrow range of trades.[xxiv] Even in crafts that were traditionally open to

women, men often managed to exert control and enact a gendered division of labour at the level of practice. In the case of flower-making, male artisans claimed exclusivity over the presses, monopolizing the use of technology and territorializing the artisanal space of the 'fleur et plumes' workshop. In the present-day these independent artisanal ateliers are being territorialised by corporate fashion giants. Bought as part of Chanel subsidiary company 'Paraffection', Pacault and Patchett question whether Masion Lemarié's corporate takeover is as altruistic as the name suggests.

Botticello and Fisher similarly question how Cluny Lace has been affected by the geopolitics of skill. Although the global restructuring of the textile industry has threatened the sustainability of this type of machine-made lace, the firm's continued survival in this context can be attributed to its distinctive Leavers production process which retains a 'hand-made' character. Paradoxically Cluny Lace also benefitted from Leavers local decline as it acquired materials, machinery and skilled operators from closing factories, leading to the re-concentration of regional skill into the one factory and the factory maintaining, albeit precariously, a place in the global marketplace. And it is Botticello and Fisher's attention to the micro level of production at Cluny Lace – to the bodily, material and mechanical concentrations and distributions of skill in the factory – that highlights its resistances to global macro-political economic forces. It is also at the micro-level of practice that Brice and Hunt highlight the radical potential of skill, whether for the 'rewilding' of wildlife art or cultivating more 'careful' modes of existence. Overall what all the papers point out is that the practice of skill, and its sites and situations, are far from apolitical.

To conclude, we believe this is a ground-breaking collection of papers which draws strength from its interdisciplinary authorship yet coherence through their shared concern with the cultural, political and geographical manifestations of skill, and considerations of the histories and futures of skilled practice. Each author also explores these issues of skill by drawing on novel yet methodologically rigorous procedures, ranging from learning to hand-knit lace, keep bees and build bothies through to visual and performative ethnographies of musical rehearsals, haute couture workshops, factory floors and wetland habitats. These techniques broadly encapsulate the turn towards practice-based inquiry in cultural geography that has witnessed academics using and honing their own skills, new and existing, as part of their research. Accordingly, the collection also makes a significant contribution to *Cultural Geographies in Practice*.

What the collection does not offer is the last word on skill. As Ingold identifies there are at least 'five questions of skill' that the papers prompt yet leave unanswered, questions he takes up in the afterword. In addition, we recognise there are areas of skill that the collection does not address, namely the specific skill(s) of non-human animals and artificial intelligences. We think attention to these forms of life will take research on skill in new directions.[xxv] So whether you follow these directions or those set out by our contributors, the future paths of skill(ed) research will still be remarkably unpredictable – enjoy!

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[ii] D.Pye, The Nature and Art of Workmanship (Cambridge University Press, 1968; reprinted by Cambium Press, 2002).
[iii] Cited in R. Sennett, The Craftsman (London: Allen Lane, 2008), p. 123.
[iv] JD.Dewsbury and D.Bissell, 'Habit Geographies: the Perilous Zones in the Life of the Individual', Cultural Geographies, 22(1), p. 23.
[v] G.Deleuze and F.Guattari, Nomadology: The War Machine, (Seattle, Wormwood Distribution, 2010), pp. 26.
[vi] Cited in: T.Ingold, Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 216.
[vii] See: T.Ingold, Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture (London: Routledge, 2013).
[viii] T.Ingold, 'The Textility of Making', Cambridge Journal of Economics, 34, 2010, p. 97.
[ix] B. Stiegler, Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus, Trans. R.Beardsworth and G.Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
[x] M.Mauss, 'Techniques of the Body', Economy and Society 2, 1973, pp. 70-88.
[xi] A.Leroi-Gourhan, Gesture and Speech, Trans. A.Bostock Berger (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993 [1964]).
[xii] Leroi-Gourhan, 'Gesture and Speech', p. 179.
[xiii] Leroi-Gourhan, 'Gesture and Speech'.
[xiv] Stiegler, 'Technics and Time', p. 17.
[xv] See T.Ingold, '"Tools for the Hand, Language for the Face': An Appreciation of Leroi-Gourhan's Gesture and Speech', Studies in the History and Philosophy of Biology & Biomedical Science, 30(4), 1999, pp. 411-453.
[xvi] Leroi-Gourhan, 'Gesture and Speech', p. 255.
[xvii] Leroi-Gourhan, 'Gesture and Speech', p. 254-255

[xviii] T.Ingold, The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 353.
[xix] Ingold, 'Perception', p. 5.
[xx] Ingold, 'Perception', p. 199.
[xxi] B.Latour, 'A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)', Keynote lecture for the Networks of Design meeting of the Design History Society Falmouth, Cornwall, 3rd September 2008, http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/112-DESIGN-CORNWALL-GB.pdf
[xxii] D.Bissel, 'Habit Displaced: The Disruption of Skilful Performance', Geographical Research, 51(2), 2013, pp. 120–9
[xxiii] J.Lea, 'Becoming Skilled: The Cultural and Corporeal Geographies of Teaching and Learning Thai Yoga Massage', Geoforum, 40, 2009, pp. 465–74.
[xxiv] See: M.Patchett, 'Historical Geographies of Apprenticeship: Rethinking and Retracing Craft Conveyance Over Time and Place', Journal of Historical Geography, 55, January 2017, pp. 30-43.
[xxv] Ingold sketches out the idea of 'species-specific' skills in in Chapter 19 of 'Perception', however, more research is needed to develop this line of thinking. And in a forthcoming paper, Tom Roberts pushes Stiegler's insistence on the ontological intertwinement of humans and technology further by suggesting we consider 'technical objects as 'modes of existence' in their own right'. See: T.Roberts, 'Thinking Technology for the Anthropocene: Encountering 3D Printing through the Philosophy of Gilbert Simondon', Cultural Geographies Online First, http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1474474017704204, p. 8.